

2017 Division-Villages “l’Isle Verte”

Chenin Blanc

Columbia Valley AVA Willard Vineyard

One of the fastest growing and diverse American wine growing regions of the past 40 years is the Columbia Valley, a wide swath of land that reaches from the northern border of Oregon to well into the northeastern parts of Washington State. Within this region is the Yakima Valley, home to our old vine Chenin Blanc at Willard Farms. This Chenin vineyard has 40 years of own-rooted development at the highest elevation in the north central Yakima, both of which aspects have helped insulate the vines from the year to year climate variation, and also from the intense daytime heat and cool to cold temperatures at night that Yakima is known for.

The Willard Chenin vines are planted on soils formed from volcanic Miocene uplift against basalt bedrock with the primary top soil being made up of quartz and lime-silica, overlaid with the mixed glacial sedimentary runoff of Missoula floods that makes the soils in the region so dynamic and unique. We adore this particular site, as it is one of the last remaining old vine Chenin Blanc sites in the Pacific Northwest, has demonstrated a unique and interesting terroir influence in the wines, and is farmed by an excellent, albeit quirky, farmer named Jim Willard who has a deep understanding of the soils and region.

Taking a page from the books of some of our favorite domaines of the Loire Valley, we make multiple picking passes (typically two in the year) to pick both vibrant and lively earlier acid driven grapes, and the more fruit concentrated and complex flavored later picked grapes. During the growing season of 2017, we worked extensively with the canopy management to improve Chenin’s notorious variability in ripeness. The results were clearly beneficial and our first pick was healthy and much more even. As the weather cooled, the ripening slowed and we were able to accumulate some nice hang time on the vines before the primary 2nd pick, which dominates the “l’Isle Verte.”

We created a pied de cuve (early native ferment) with a small amount of grapes from the vineyard to build a strong yeast population from the native flora. This was added to the first pick juice before being moved into two neutral white Burgundy barrels and a 75-gallon stainless barrel for fermentation. The second pick juice was split between the heart of the press, which went directly into a stainless 75 gal barrel and the rest, which went into mostly neutral and one year old French oak barrels. The ferments took off quickly this year and completed quite quickly going completely dry, the first time in our experience from this site.

The 2017 “l’Isle Verte” Chenin Blanc is a truly memorable and has laser like precision, a lovely nervy quality, is savory, and dominated by the honeysuckle and beeswax that Chenin is famous for. The aromatics are flinty, smoky and vegetal in a way that is totally reminiscent of Vouvray Sec. Honeysuckle leads the pallet, but the wine is definitely more mineral than fruit, mid and back palate are all earth and stones. The wine’s medium bodied paired with it’s racy edge make it a deliciously refreshing option now, but also allows plenty of room development into a compelling and complex Chenin as it ages.

Alc 13.9%, 175 cases produced

